

The Lady of Edgecliff

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Street art is a developing postmodern phenomenon with the profound capacity to challenge the cultural assumptions underpinning modernity and a modernist approach to art. Taking Bruno Dutot's work, 'The Lady of Edgecliff', or 'Oucha' as a starting point, one can explore the cultural importance of street art, as it elucidates the contradictions inherent to contemporary society – which exists as a hybrid of both modernity and postmodernity. Postmodernism informs the way in which street art contests the prevalence of empiricism within modernity, which values technique over symbolic meaning and aesthetics. Street art simultaneously challenges the modernist notion of progress towards utopian ideals, often focusing more on dystopia and revisiting the past through the use of intertextuality, viewing the world as a simulacrum rather than as an absolute truth. In its total public accessibility, street art also challenges the notion of art as a commodity, as well as the modernist association of art with institutionalism, which positions the artist as a tradesperson, and the art world as a business. Yet with increasing numbers of acclaimed street artists shifting to exhibiting in galleries and accepting commissions for their work, the distinctions between postmodern and modern art are blurred. As such, street art reveals the enduring vestiges of modernity in contemporary culture, and thus questions how such ideas remain in conjunction with the ideas of postmodernism – suggesting that contemporary society is not unconditionally postmodern but instead exists as a hybridised culture, with interrelated and interdependent elements of both postmodernity and modernity central to our contemporary milieu.

Postmodernity rejects universal grand narratives and thus disputes most of the fundamental ideas of modernity – viewing modernity itself as a narrative construction. As an inherently postmodern art form, street art rejects the socially constructed distinction between 'high' art and 'low' art, with its public accessibility allowing a permeable field between these oppositions. 'High Art' can be described as: "formalised and structured. The artist is trained in these forms and is expected to follow them. This art tends to be elitist and divisive...it excludes the people who aren't trained to perceive it and understand it correctly. Obviously, this would include the majority of the public." (Fahmy, 1988) The classification of art according to perceived cultural value and technical skill is a key facet of modernism and contributes to the image of the art world as exclusive and discriminatory – street artist Banksy has stated "A small group create, promote, purchase, exhibit and decide the success of Art...when you go to an art gallery you are simply a tourist looking at the trophy cabinet of a few millionaires" (Banksy, 2005) Street art explicitly challenges this, as it embraces the majority of the public, deliberately including them through placing their works in exposed and often heavily populated urban environments. In this way, street artists align themselves with postmodernity, as "some may argue that street art and graffiti embrace the post-modern rejection of elitist ideals that modernism held." (Clark, 2009) This repudiation of 'high' and 'low' art distinctions manifests itself in the level of audience involvement within street art. Paul Messaris highlights the level of viewer detachment valued in modernity, due to ideas of visual literacy and its direct relation to socio-economic status and education. He states that "the ability to deal with abstract concepts in visual form is a skill that is consciously cultivated today by artists, critics, and informed viewers... such people are better at this skill

than the average woman or man on the street.” (Messaris, 1994) In contrast, postmodernity is profoundly concerned with the role of the audience, evident in the rise of installation art and artworks that require tactile audience involvement. Irving Sandler claims that such work was consistent with a postmodern concern with social matters, as they allowed a direct presentation of issues. (1996, pg 553) Street artist WK Interact asserted, “I don’t want people to just sit and look at my work. I want them to interact with it. I want it to have an impact.” This statement reveals a fundamental paradigm underpinning street art – that audience involvement is key to creative and artistic practice. Expounding on Roland Barthe’s notion of ‘Death of the Author’ (1977), postmodernism operates under the post-structuralist notion that the audience creates meaning from a work based on their own reference points, rather than the creator. Michel Foucault positions the creator as the “Derridean center of the text, the place which originates the text, yet remains outside it.” (Klages, 2001) This concept allows one to understand street art as ‘audience-centric’, dependant on the notion that audiences will be able to understand and interpret works in idiosyncratic ways. Dutot’s ‘Oucha’ painting is an image of willowy female silhouette, regularly modified and updated by the artist, as he changes the colours, background and other aspects of the painting. It often contains ambiguous text which references recent social topics or is relevant only to the artist himself, allowing viewers to ascertain Dutot’s underlying meaning in terms of their own experiences – they may not always grasp the meaning intended by Dutot, but this is not the point, rather that the public is presented with an opportunity to discover and interpret art. In doing so, Dutot and other street artists alike deliberately challenge an elitist view of art and dispute the distinctions of ‘high’ and ‘low’, implicitly asserting that everybody should have access to art. In examining the tension that exists between a modernist, elitist approach to artwork, and street art’s overt denial of this, it is evident that there is existing conflict between the rise of postmodernity and the remnants of modernity in society, with no clear delineation from one to the other.

This rejection of a modernist distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art is similarly evident when examining the content of street art, and the technique used – in its postmodern hybridity, it combines an interest in technique with a focus on symbolic meaning and aesthetics. Allan Schwartzman sums up this interrelated focus in saying, “Street artists...question the existing environment with its own language. They attempt to have their work communicate with everyday people about socially relevant themes in ways that are informed by aesthetic values.” (Schwartzman, 1985) Postmodernism willingly and deliberately adopts aspects of alleged ‘low’ culture, often eschewing difficult technique in favour of simpler methods – for example, graffiti artists’ use of stencilling and spray paint. A similar example is the phenomenon of ‘Yarn Bombing’, knitted street art, which adopts elements of craft (traditionally considered to be ‘low’ culture) in order to make a point about the value of aesthetic beauty and everyday creativity. Yet many street artists are also technically proficient, resulting in an increasing appreciation for the value of street art – “the burgeoning in the US of urban graffiti into large scale, colourful tableaux was recognised as a vivid art form.” (Archer, 1997) Numerous street artists come from a fine art or graphic design background, such as Dan Witz, Robin Rhode, and Leopold Kessler - Dutot’s work itself is recognised for its cultural value as well as his technical aptitude. Warwick Hatton, of Woollahra Council stated “its cultural value is recognised...it is greatly appreciated by many people in the area, so we allow it to remain.” (Rogers, 2009) This multiplicity of skill levels is intrinsically postmodern and allows street art to be accessible both for viewer and artist – it also allows a stronger focus on content and symbolic meaning. The role of street art, particularly the mural, is considered by Michael Archer to be “twofold: to depict events that celebrated the political power of the working class... and to provide some visual excitement.” (Archer, 1997, pg 132) While modernity was defined by empiricism, reason and rationality,

valuing technique over symbolic or aesthetic worth, postmodernity is more often concerned with symbolic meaning and audience interpretation, valuing ambiguity over certainty and encouraging incongruity. Italian art critic Achille Bonito Oliva emphasised “the passing away of the idea of progress in art. There was no longer one, linear ‘story of art’, but a multiplicity of attitudes and approaches...a freedom to look anywhere for inspiration.” (Archer, 1997, pg 143) While street art is not always concerned with technical skill, it focuses largely on symbolic meaning and content; it is an art form with an emphasis on activism and subversion. Street artist JR specialises in works which confront and question viewer’s attitudes, for example, his enlarged photo of what appears to be a black man holding a gun – however, on closer inspection it is revealed to be a video camera, compelling the viewer to “reassess our assumptions, both exposing and counteracting negative media stereotypes.” (Tate Modern, 2008). This implementation of postmodern concepts exposes a deliberate rejection of modernity, which reflects a wider social trend, with increasing focus on the figurative and the ambiguous, and a shift away from valuing the definitive nature of empiricism.

Another key element of modernity is a collective faith in progress and a fascination with change, based on hopes for utopian ideals – this is exposed and challenged in postmodernity, and often in street art, utilising the public medium to raise social awareness. The ideas of the postmodern present in street art indicate a contemporary dismissal of such modernist ideals. While modernity was focused on social progress and transformation - “Belief in the ability of societies to organise their own self improvement became crucial in the development of modernity” (Gillen and Ghosh, 2007, pg 33) - postmodernism often involves a revisiting of the past, through the use of intertextuality and pastiche. Art of the postmodern era, and street art in particular, is less concerned with originality or progress towards improved skill than modernist art – “newness could no longer be a criterion of judgement because newness, it was realised, was unattainable...a postmodern culture was one, therefore, of quotation.” (Archer, 1997, p 143) Street art itself often explicitly rejects modern ideas of progress, in favour of intertextuality and detournement – “inspired by Dadaist collage...involved a technique where elements of an original are reassembled into a new creation, such as taking ads or mass media symbols and modifying the meaning of the original.” (Gavin, 2007, p7) Yet in doing so, street artists often create a work that is innovative in its use of an existing object/idea. This paradox is central to postmodernity, and allows works to explore the contradictions inherent to a culture that upholds modernist ideals alongside those of the postmodern. It highlights the fact that “Postmodernism is parasitical upon the very conceptual categories promulgated by modernism which it seeks to criticize” (Chia, 1996, pg 7), and thus contemporary society is intrinsically paradoxical. This revisiting of the past in street art is often utilised to satirise, parody, and highlight social irony – acting as a critique of contemporary culture. In this way, street art adopts the ideas of the postmodern in place of those of modernity, as it is most often concerned with exploring dystopia and the degradation of society, rather than utopian ideals to be aspired to. According to Robert Philbin, the attraction of street art lies in the fact that “systems of authority are legitimately called into question and broken down” (2009), with artists such as John Fekner challenging issues of mass media, commercial greed and urban decay – for example his 1979 work ‘De-Emphasize Advertisements’. Other artists, such as JR, work in a more implicit way to compel the public to think more deeply about the shortcomings of their society. “His work is often subtly socially conscious. JR takes evocative photographs of marginalized people from around the world and blows them up to massive proportions. Towering over you, it's difficult to escape thinking about who these people are, and what their stories are.” (Gould, 2008) However, street artists do explore the ideas of the modern, as “the many decades of street art experimentation circle all the way back to the origins of Modernism” in their references to “earlier Symbolist art, Surrealism, late

Romanticism, Art Nouveau graphics...emerging from the late Impressionist movement into early Modernist experiments.” (Philbin, 2009) Yet despite their references to modernism as an art movement, most street artists continue to concurrently dismiss the modern desire for utopia, instead depicting dystopic elements of society and exploring decadence and depravity. Contemporary society reflects this paradox, as the co-existence of aspects of modernity and postmodernity suggest the boundaries between these ideologies are porous and fluid – it is possible to assert that “we have never actually attained modernity - let alone postmodernity.” (Crawford, 1994)

The accessible nature of street art can be seen to render it a critique of modernity, as it challenges the modernist notion of art as a commodity, which positions the artist as a tradesperson and the art world as a business. The period of modernity embraced the idea that art should be sold, bought, and owned, controlled by the upper class and contained within galleries or private homes – “from the 16th through the 18th centuries, the institutions of the art world were first established throughout Europe: museums...an art market with dealers and patrons.” (Sawyer, 2006) This was due to the pervasive culture of institutionalism existing within the modern period, during which there was a immense increase in bureaucratisation, including “the control of modern lives by the state...the intense privatisation of life caused by capitalist social organisation...large scale surveillance, the expansion of state power and state legitimisation.” (Illouz, 2008) Street art challenges the idea that art should be positioned within such a culture of institutionalism and commodification and instead allows art to be publicly accessible – able to be both viewed and created by anyone. A key element of street art is that it communicates with everyone who passes it, on a quotidian basis, becoming part of a landscape or surprising and confronting people within everyday circumstances – “It catches people where they least expect it and jolts them out of their everyday lives”, states artist Slink (Gavin, 2007, pg 100). Street art thus reveals a social shift away from the bureaucratisation of contemporary culture, aligning with a postmodern desire for independence from the State. It challenges a culture in which power is consolidated within institutions and government bureaucracies, as it is concerned with illegality and censorship – many street artists in fact thrive on the challenge presented by creating illicit artwork and defying regulations. An example of this is street artist Dan Witz, who deliberately uses the illegality of graffiti as impetus for his work, motivated by increasing police presence in New York, where he is based. He states, “Whereas before I was really laissez-faire, now I design pieces that are like strategic attack.” (Gavin, 2007, pg 120)

Yet the increasing number of street artists commissioned to produce works or exhibit in galleries reveals that the distinctions between postmodernism and modernism are often blurred. Jean Michael Basquiat, as one example, began as a graffiti artist, under the pseudonym of SAMO. Yet he gained recognition in various cultural circles as an artist, following his involvement in the Times Square Show, and as a result began to exhibit galleries, becoming renowned for his role in the neo-expressionist movement. By 1980 he had divested himself of his SAMO tag and become well known in his own right; taken on by the Annina Nosei Gallery in New York, and “given materials and a basement space to work in. Four years later he was with one of the major...New York galleries.” (Archer, 1997) Dutot himself, operates a gallery in Edgecliff, and thus in fact propagates the institutionalism he rejects in his street art. Similarly, London’s Tate Modern presented the work of six acclaimed street artists in 2008, in the first major display of street art in a gallery – using the building’s façade to display works from Blu, Faile, JR, Nunca, Os Gemeos and Sixeart. Given street art originated as a postmodern rejection of modernist institutionalism, this intersection of both movements indicates an existing tension between elements of the modern and the

postmodern. Burrell and Cooper describe this as “the modernist-postmodernist confrontation” in which “two radically different systems of thought and logic are at work.” (1988, pg 110) While many would describe present society as unequivocally postmodern, this definitive view of culture is in fact highly modernist in itself – instead, it can be said that postmodernism is not “a paradigm that functions as a container” (Clegg, 2009), and does not define or limit society, but instead interacts and depends on modernity, particularly in its artistic manifestations.

Thus, street art acts as an example of the paradoxical nature of present society, in that it reveals the co-existence of elements of both postmodernity and modernity. In examining postmodernism through the framework of street art it is evident that “even as it resists modernism...it interacts with it...Postmodernism is a complexification, a hybridization and sublation of the modern – not it’s antithesis.” (Clegg, 2009) Rejecting modernist ideals, it simultaneously affirms notions of progress and combines a modern focus on empiricism with a focus on symbolism and aesthetics. Street artists gradual affirmation of institutionalism represents a greater intersection of the modern and postmodern, suggesting that the two are not necessarily epochs but ideologies and ways of life that have developed over time. Contemporary culture cannot be described as categorically postmodern, as this discounts the enduring facets of modernity. Instead both ideologies are fluid and interconnected, developing a parasitical relationship – as a society, we do not exist in either a postmodern period or a modern period, but instead in a hybridised society which is as much dependant on the past as it is concerned with the future.

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